

# Applied Research on Drama in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

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**Abstract**—Second language teaching and learning with the medium of drama playing is an innovative pedagogy, which is helpful to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, and stimulate learners' sense of cooperation and learning motivation by affording a simulated real social context, authentic communicative tasks and a holistic learning mode. Therefore it is necessary to introduce dramatics into Teaching Chinese as a Second Language in view of the current situation of International Chinese Education. The research conducts a teaching practice based on the theoretical foundations and teaching practices made by predecessors, providing a teaching case with specific procedures, a detailed teaching feedback survey, and also discusses some challenges and limitations of the application of drama in TCSL, hoping to provide a valuable reference for TCSL teachers.

**Keywords**—*drama; Teaching Chinese as a Second Language; intercultural communicative competence; cooperation; holistic learning*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the total number of overseas students in China generally maintains an annual average of 8%-9% growth rate. The data recently released by Chinese Ministry of Education show that there are about 184,799 overseas students studying in China in 2015. Under these circumstances, more and more Chinese scholars and educators are concerned with the issue of innovation of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL). Zhao Jinming [1] pointed out that TCSL teachers should learn from other foreign language teaching models, especially English teaching model in order to seek innovation and breakthrough. Li Quan [2] also emphasized the importance of choosing innovative teaching models when discussing the idea for founding the discipline of International Chinese Language Education. And Cui Xiliang [3] pointed out that Chinese textbook development needs innovations on the basis of the other language textbook construction. It can be seen, the issue of innovation of Chinese teaching methods has become a common concern in this field.

Both as an art form and a highly effective teaching and learning methodology, drama has been applied in

educational settings successfully. This teaching method with the medium of drama playing thrived in Britain in the middle of the 20th century, and soon afterwards was extended to the teaching of a wider range of disciplines, such as physics, economics, science, as well as adult vocational training. As an effective teaching method, it has been also widely adopted in second language teaching and learning, especially in English teaching. The author holds that the application of drama in TCSL, as an innovation, can not only stimulate learners in learning, but at the same time to improve their language proficiency and social communicative skills. This paper aims at exploring the essence of drama in language learning, and its application in TCSL, hoping to provide a valuable reference for TCSL teachers.

## II. DRAMA IN L2 LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

### A. Drama in L2 Language Teaching and Learning: A Brief Literature Review

The notion of drama in education can be dated back to French thinker Rousseau, who was the first one that put forward the idea of applying drama in teaching, but his idea did not form a teaching theory until the early 20th century with the first publication on theatrical pedagogy by British scholar Harriet Findlay Johnson in 1907, this pedagogy revitalized in England, and soon was applied in foreign language teaching. The following are the influential contributions and teaching practices made by some language teaching researchers. Maley & Duff [4] explored the techniques to apply drama in language learning, providing a lot of dramatic teaching recourses and teaching techniques for foreign language teachers; Kao & O'Neil [5] introduced the notion of process drama in second language learning, pointing out some specific suggestions on the design of teaching activities and teaching evaluation. Schewe & Shaw [6] discussed the construction of the theoretical framework of dramatic teaching and the problems of teacher training. Byram & Fleming [7] collected 14 important papers, which discussed the role of drama in cultivating learners' intercultural communicative competence and corporation learning from the perspectives of learners, teachers and researchers. And Bräuer [8] summarized the latest

achievements of dramatic teaching in developing learners' non-verbal communicative competence and intercultural communicative awareness, and also summarized the problems and counter-measures in teaching practice. Compared with research work by western scholars, the research of drama in TCSL is still at the beginning stage. Wang Yongyang [9] discussed the application of drama in CSL with a case teaching practice in an Australian university in support of her suggestions. Zhang Lianye [10] reported a case study of TCSL in the USA, and the author found that drama's integration function is useful for second language teaching.

### B. Teaching Practice of Drama in L2 Context

It is a common practice of drama in L2 context, which is different from the way that drama in literature teaching for native students aimed at cultivating students' literary aesthetic, but rather developing students' second language skills, improving cross-cultural communicative competence for the purpose. The advantages of this teaching approach is that students are actively involved in the teaching process, improving students' motivation and emotional investment in the learning process to learn to solve problems, creating a pleasant and relaxed learning environment, in which, as what Schmidt says, learners get a multisensory learning and emotional input [11].

The main forms used by teachers in L2 classroom include role play, mini-drama, and process drama. One of their main difference lies in the proportion of theatrical elements. Role play can be done in the classroom without strict requirements about theatrical elements and the performing time is very flexible, while mini-drama often needs to use props and costumes, sometimes a stage performance. And large-scale dramatic pedagogy can be designed into different stages throughout the semester.

### C. Theoretical Foundations for Drama in L2 Teaching and Learning

#### 1) Communicative approach theory

In the 1970s, Hymes [12] put forward the notion of communicative competence in order to emphasize communicative language ability in social context. In the 1980s, Canale & Swain [13] introduced the theory of communicative competence into the field of second language acquisition, and in their model, communicative competence was further analyzed into four parts: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence. And among the four parts, what can be cultivated and acquired directly by means of dramatic approach are learners' sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Sociolinguistic competence refers to learners' understanding of the social communicative context, such as the roles that participants take, the relationships between the roles and the communicative intentions of the different roles in the communicative process. Strategic competence refers to the ability to initiate, maintain and terminate the communicative action. Dramatic approach provides learners a simulated real scene and the "authentic" communicative tasks, covering the

key elements in social communication and interaction. When learners are in the process of developing scripts and staging performance, the learner's communicative competence gets exercised and improved at the same time.

#### 2) Experiential learning theories

David Kolb [14] put out a relatively complete experiential learning theory influenced by the theories of American educator John Dewey, social psychologist Lewin, and cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget in 1980s. According to Kolb, four steps go through the experiential learning model: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. A learner, generally speaking, will begin with a specific behavior to understand its impact. Through the observation, he or she realizes the repeated same behavior will bring out the same result in the same situation as expected. The four steps form two types of inter-crossed continuum: from positive experiencing to observation and thinking, from abstract concept to concrete experience. This learning theory emphasizes blending experience, observation, cognition and learning behaviors into the whole learning process [15]. The notion shed light on foreign language teaching by stressing collaborative learning, the simulation of the social reality in classroom, which is in line with other communicative language teaching philosophy.

In fact, before Kolb put forward the theory, American educator Edgar Dale [16] had proposed the famous "cone of experience" in the book *Audio-visual Methods in Teaching*. In this cone, as Fig.1 shows below, Dale made 10 divisions according to three different means of acquiring experience, and each division represents a stage between the two extremes, that is between direct experience and pure abstraction.

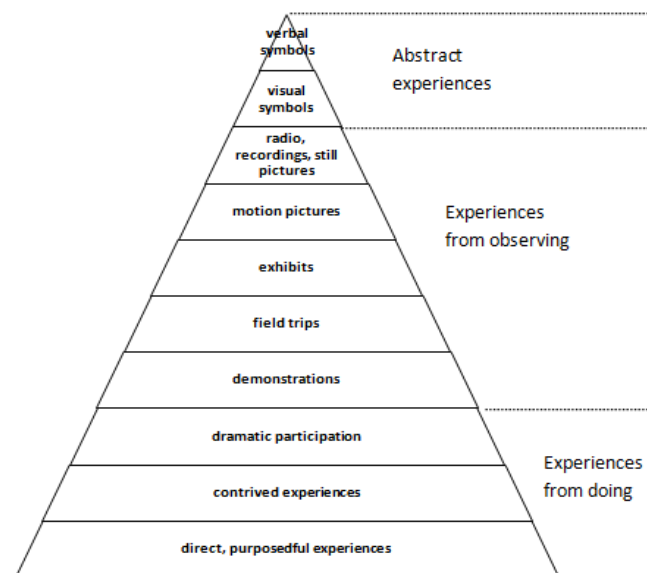


Fig. 1. The "cone of experience" (Edgar Dale, 1946)

The cone, though, is merely something to help explain the relationship of the various types of sensory materials, as

they move from direct experience to the most abstract kind of learning, what Dale suggests through the cone is that the more concrete the experience at the lower base of the cone, the easier for the learners; while the more abstract the experience at the top of the cone, the more difficult. However, the middle stages of the cone involve observing, which can help build up the part of indirect concrete experiences. The implication for teachers is that learning should be started from concrete experiences, and language is better acquired in a real social context in which learners are engaged in experiencing, observing and doing. As we can see, “dramatization by participation” is at the lower base of the cone because it gets closer to the direct experience, hence involving *doing*. Dale claims that dramatic participation is reconstructing the experience of real life, since we cannot experience directly something that has already happened. Dramatic participation can help students get as close as possible to certain realities that we cannot reach at first-hand. It can be more fruitful when students play a part in dramatic reconstruction.

### III. APPLYING DRAMA IN TCSL: A TYPICAL CASE OF LESSON DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Next is a teaching practice by the author during the stay at Overseas Education College of Xiamen University for PH.D program in 2015. The 10 students were from University of Alabama of the United States for their short-term oral Chinese class with focus on listening and speaking, and experiencing Chinese culture. The Chinese proficiency test they took before class indicated that all of the students were at the elementary and intermediate levels.

Since there is no such a drama-based teaching model to follow in TCSL, the author referred to the seven basic steps in acting English through drama proposed by Dr. Gary Carlin [17]. The seven steps includes selecting plays, correcting pronunciation, reading the play or script, discussing and choosing characters, developing the inner monologues of the character, reading the script and speaking to the partners, and finally rehearsing. Based on the seven steps, the author made some modification according to the teaching needs: (1). encouraging the students to develop the scripts based on the texts they learned; (2). to set aside enough time for students to develop script and choose characters, at the same time let them read their lines and check the pronunciation; (3). there is no such high demand for analyzing inner monologues for their limited Chinese proficiency; (4). After the final performance, teachers and the audience need to make some comments and feedback.

#### A. Teaching Design

This unit is designed for a review lesson of unit 9 “Renting an Apartment” in the textbook Developing Chinese: Intermediate Speaking Course. Two texts are In this unit, and the students are expected to use the basic vocabulary and sentence structures to rent a house by phone, and learn to make effective communication with a house agent or landlord about some questions and request, such as the sanitary conditions, the distance from the campus,

supermarkets and bus-stations around, and the equipment inside.

Before class, the well-designed performing tasks, characters, scenes and plot points are written on the board entitled “Renting an Apartment” as “Table 1” shows both in English and Chinese:

TABLE 1. RENTING AN APARTMENT

<b>Task 1: To perform how Marvin inquires the house rental information with the agent on the phone, according to the dialogue in the text.</b>	
Characters	Marvin, a college student from University of Alabama of the United States; The house agent on the phone, a Chinese young lady
Scene 1	Campus Cafe
Plot points	Marvin asked the agent about the house type and area, building orientation, surroundings and its rent, but he was a little bit hesitating because the rent was really high. And he made an appointment to go to have a look at the apartment.
<b>Task 2: Marvin went to see the house with his friends Jimmy and Anne so as to make a decision.</b>	
Characters	Xiao Wang, a Chinese salesman of Rental company ; Marvin, a college student from University of Alabama of the United States who wants to rent an apartment; Jimmy, friend of Marvin from University of Alabama of the United States; Anne, friend of Marvin from University of Alabama of the United States
Scene 2	In the apartment
Plot points	Xiao Wang suggests Marvin that he can rent this apartment with others, on which Jimmy and Anne have a different opinion. What is Marvin’s final decision?

#### B. Teaching Procedures

##### 1) Review and grouping (10 minutes)

First, the students are guided to review the vocabulary and sentence structures by reading aloud. Next, the teacher hand out the task sheets to each student, and write down some important information on the board as well as explain the rules of the activity. And finally, the students are grouped into two groups with each 5 students. When grouping, the author takes into consideration of the actual Chinese proficiency and personal style of each students, trying to make each group comparable. After grouping, the regrouped members are seated together for their discussion and developing the script.

##### 2) Group discussions, role allocation and scheduling drama (15 minutes)

Students work in groups to discuss and decide their own roles, as well as the script. They are encouraged to speak Chinese to discuss and ask questions to the teacher. They also can refer to any material and information for their work. However, the teacher does not participate in their discussion and not make any comment of their opinions so as to minimize the disturbance to the students and let the students to solve the problems by themselves.

##### 3) Rehearsing (15 minutes)

Due to limited classroom space, the two groups can be separately arranged at both ends of the classroom in order to

avoid mutual inference, or as an alternation, one of the group can rehearse outside the classroom. While the teacher goes to each group, observing and answering any questions, correcting some mistakes and errors in pronunciation, intonation, accent, and encouraging students to perform the show without reading the script word by word.

#### 4) Performing (20 minutes)

The performance time for each group is controlled in 10 minutes. Other students as audience can ask questions to the performers, but also can express their own views and comments after the show. And the teacher, as the host, can lead the discussion and ask some questions to inspire the students to think, such as “What do you think their performance?”, “What needs to improve?”, “What makes you feel the most fun?”, and “What do you learn from their performance?” and so on.

### IV. OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The teaching objectives have been achieved judging from the scripts the students developed and the drama they performed. What’s more, their learning enthusiasm and motivation have also been greatly inspired. The author did an interview with the students inquiring for the effectiveness of this method, and in turn, the 10 students gave the author a positive feedback that it was more effective and interesting than simply reading the text and doing the exercises. Based on this teaching practice and reflection, the author summarizes the benefits of applying dramatic pedagogy in teaching TCSL as the following:

#### A. Motivation in Class Participation

All of the students are actively engaged in the activity. The two groups correctly used vocabulary and sentence patterns in the unit in writing their scripts, the second group even used some new words they referred from other reading materials and dictionaries. In addition, there are two questions students need to solve: (1) Jimmy and Anne have different opinions on sharing apartment with others; (2) Marvin need to make a decision on this matter. To these, the two group gave different stories with their bold imagination and practical living experience. And each student is both performers and audience. When one group is performing, the other groups as audience are watching carefully and expressing actively their opinions and suggestions during the discussion. From this practice, we can see there has been established a close relationship between language learning and students’ motivation in class participation by means of dramatic activity, which is helpful for their comprehension and entrenchment of the language knowledge learned from the textbook. And the process drama inspires students’ imagination, negotiation and critical thinking, making the subjective experience close to the objective.

#### B. Cooperation and Team Work

Dramatic activities in classroom can provide students more opportunities for cooperative learning, mobilizing students’ special skills and promoting their language learning. For example, one of the students in the first group has

difficulty in pronouncing the word “zū (租)”, and each time when he made such a mistake, the group members would help him to correct, and finally the student overcome this problem on the stage. Another example, the second group did not understand Chinese house types when one of them used a phrase “two bedroom and one living room” which he learned from the Chinese TV series instead of the phrase “one bedroom” in the textbook, so all the members surfed on the internet for the expressions about Chinese house types, they even made clear the house type “loft”. The above cases illustrate the advantages of dramatic teaching method in improving students’ agency and cooperation in learning process, which involves learners’ performing talent, language skills, writing ability, organizing ability and even imagination. In addition, such learning process is exactly what the process drama emphasizes that all the members put head together, think critically and learn from each other when discussing, developing the scripts and staging the story, so that individual awareness and the spirit of team work get developed in accordance.

#### C. A Sustainable, Holistic Learning

Dramatic activities in language learning, in general, involves verbal communication, physical activity and emotional involvement, which lead to a sustainable and holistic learning. On the verbal level, practices of pronunciation and listening can help learners to improve their native-like fluency and good retention of vocabulary and sentence patterns. The physical aspect, including body language and paralinguistic, can be integrated into the face-to-face interaction. Gestures can be used to illustrate the grammatical aspects with a vivid image [18], and the skills of intonation, stress and rhythm help them to explore the sounds of Chinese. Besides, drama activities involve learners’ emotion when staging the performance. The three aspects of dramatic learning are also observed in my teaching practice: the learners improved their Chinese literacy by developing the script and rehearsing the dialogues before the show, while they went into the roles on the stage with language, body language and emotions fully integrated together, thereby it was prevailing a feeling of an enjoying atmosphere and pride in achievement in the whole class.

#### D. Promoting Intercultural Communicative Competence

Canale & Swain pointed out that communicative competence is composed of four parts as we discussed above. Learners have to master these knowledge and skills through actually using language in communication, so as to improve their communicative competence. This view coincides with the experiential learning theory, that is, learning is a process of transforming and creating knowledge through experience, and it is only through personal practice and experience, and based on which to rethink and reflect that can the learners complete the construction of knowledge. In the teaching practice, the author finds that such theatrical performance is exactly a process for the learners to experience the communication and social interaction demonstrated in the text and script. First of all, the vocabulary and character relationships in the script can be contextualized by stage performance, which can help learners to accurately



understand the meaning of the text. There are some expressions that my students wrote in their scripts, such as “犹豫不决 (pause and ponder), “大吃一惊 (greatly surprised)” and even “乔迁之喜 (congratulations on moving into a new house). Those expressions are about psychological state or Chinese specific culture, with the abstract explanation from the dictionary or the teachers. However, through the performance and PPT or Video display, learners can visually understand the meaning of these words. Secondly, the simulating activities provide learners the opportunity to experience and apply the discourse strategies in real face-to-face interaction, and finally improve their cross-cultural communicative competence.

#### *E. Some Challenges and Limited Use in L2 Classroom*

As a new teaching method, however, dramatic approach may have some challenges and limitations when applied in L2 classroom. In the teaching practice, for example, the author encountered the following problems: (1). It is a big challenge for teachers to manage the class, since students are the center in such class, and it is very difficult to control the time when they are discussing and performing. Although such teaching method has broken away from the tradition that the students are led by teachers, it is easy to go to the opposite extreme; (2). Students are not able to communicate in Chinese fully during group discussion. It seems that they lend themselves more to their mother tongue, except when developing scripts; (3). There exists the issue of learner's individual differences. For example, one of the students came up to the author and said that she could not perform before the show, who looks a little introverted. Although she finished her job under the author's encouragement, the fact is that the introverted students tend to choose the role that involves fewer lines of dialogue. Some even resist and refuse to participate in such activities, while the extrovert will get more opportunities to practice. These problems need to be further explored in dramatic teaching.

#### V. CONCLUSION

As a practical subject, the teaching objective of TCSL is to cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence in order to accomplish any communicative tasks in Chinese social context successfully. And drama in TCSL is a creative and innovative method for teachers to achieve the teaching goal since it creates a fun and practice-oriented learning experiences that facilitating learner's language competence and communicative competence. Through the investigation and applied research, the author finds that drama in language teaching do play a very important role in enhancing teaching effectiveness, as well as learners' communicative competence. However, the findings are contradict to the current teaching situation that dramatic participation is still not in the scope of TCSL teachers' attention. Therefore, the author concludes that it will be a good attempt to apply drama in TCSL appropriately based on teaching plan and needs, so as to realize the principle of student centeredness and cross-

cultural teaching, hoping to get more teachers' attention and practice in this field.

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